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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 002799

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NSC STAFF FOR WATERS

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM KDEM EAID EG

SUBJECT: EGYPT: ACTIVISTS RALLY TO PROTEST CLOSURE OF HUMAN RIGHTS NGO

REF: A. CAIRO 2581

1B. CAIRO 1283

Classified by DCM Stuart Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (SBU) Summary: Leaders of Cairo's human rights and democracy activist community rallied on September 16 at a downtown demonstration to protest the GOE's September 8 closure of the Association for Human Rights and Legal Aid (AHRLA), apparently for accepting foreign funding, including from the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy, without GOE approval. NGO activists told diplomatic observers from the Dutch, Canadian, German, Norwegian, British, and U.S. embassies that they feel increasingly under threat from the GOE, and that they are concerned that the recent GOE move against AHRLA may presage a wider crackdown on Egyptian civil society. End summary.

12. (SBU) Poloff and LES political specialist observed the demonstration, which had been widely advertised via NGO e-mail notices, on the morning of September 16. Poloffs from several like-minded Embassies (Dutch, Canadian, German, Norwegian, and British) also observed the demonstration. Approximately 50 NGO activists representing at least 25 different Cairo-based NGOs held a largely silent protest, lasting for nearly an hour, at the corner of Talaat Harb and Marouf Streets, in Cairo's downtown. Most of the demonstrators held small hand-lettered signs criticizing the GOE's hostility to human rights organizations. The police presence was relatively light: approximately 50 officers, including a mix of uniformed and plain clothes personnel, along with a dozen riot police. Journalists mingled freely with the protesters, conducting interviews and taking pictures.

13. (C) The civil society activists at the protest represented a "Who's Who" of Egyptian democracy and human rights leaders. In addition to Tarek Khater, the head of the now-shuttered AHRLA, other "A-list" activists included Ahmed Samih of the Andalus Center for Tolerance (a USAID grantee); Negad El-Borai of the United Group (a MEPI and USAID grantee); Hafez Abou Seada of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights and the National Council for Human Rights; Nehad Aboul Qumsan of the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights; Hossam Bahgat of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights; Karam Sabr of the Land Center for Human Rights (a MEPI grantee); and George Ishaq, the former leader of Kifaya.

14. (C) The exact reasons behind the GOE's closure of AHRLA remain murky. Press reports indicate that the Ministry of Social Solidarity (responsible for NGO regulation) has alleged financial transgressions by AHRLA including unauthorized acceptance of foreign funds. AHRLA director Tarek Khater (protect) told us that he believes the closure stems from AHRLA's acceptance of funding from the Canadians

(CIDA), the Swiss Fund for Development, and the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy (NED). According to Khater, AHRLA notified the Ministry of Social Solidarity "seven months ago" of its plans to accept funding from these donors. MSS did not reply to AHRLA within the legally mandated 60 day response period, so AHRLA proceeded with its project, despite not having explicit permission to proceed. (Note: We are working to obtain the exact details of NED funding to AHRLA. The NED website notes two 2005 awards to AHRLA: \$25,000 for human rights reporting and \$30,000 for election reporting. It is not clear if the closure is connected to these or subsequent as-yet-unpublicized awards. End note.)

¶15. (C) Khater also told us that he suspects that AHRLA's high profile advocacy on behalf of the family of a deceased torture victim may have played a role in the GOE's decision to close AHRLA. Since mid-2006, AHRLA has supported the family of Mohamed Abdul Qader El-Sayed, a detainee who died in police custody in 2003. AHRLA's lawyers argued that State Security Investigations Service (SSIS) Captain Ashraf Mostafa Hussain Safwat had tortured the detainee to death. AHRLA also reported in late 2006 that SSIS had pressured the family to drop the case. (Note: The Captain Safwat prosecution was the first prosecution of a State Security official on charges of detainee abuse since 1986. End note.) On September 3, a Cairo Criminal Court ruled that Captain Safwat was not guilty in the torture murder of detainee El-Sayed. The GOE subsequently closed AHRLA on September 8.

¶16. (C) Khater also linked AHRLA's closure to its advocacy on behalf of the Center for Trade Union and Workers' Services (CTUWS), an organization registered as a civil company which the GOE shuttered in April and May 2007 on the grounds that CTUWS was illegally involved in political activity and labor

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rights activism. (Ref B describes the CTUWS closure.)

¶17. (C) Said Abdul Hafez, an NGO leader familiar with the AHRLA matter, told us on September 16 that rumors are also circulating that an internal AHRLA leadership conflict (NFI), between Khater and his deputy Mahmoud Abdul Moneim, may also have played a role in the closure.

¶18. (C) Comment: The significant turnout at the demonstration by an A-list of Egyptian civil society leaders and by diplomatic observers from like-minded Embassies is indicative of the growing concern among NGO activists and donor embassies about the GOE's apparent willingness to curtail NGO activities. This concern is likely to increase as the GOE moves towards passage of a new NGO law, which many activists fear will be more restrictive than the current law (Ref A).

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